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In Search of the Origin of the Sabbath - Part 2

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In Search of the

ORIGIN OF THE SABBATH

(Concluded)

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ANY theory of the origin of the Sabbath bears also on the origin of the week. A half century and more ago, when it was fashionable to derive many Biblical motifs from Babylon, numerous scholars spoke of a Babylonian origin of the week.[1] While it is true that both in Babylon and in Ugarit special periods of seven days are found, Meesters emphasizes that nowhere outside of Israel do we encounter an unbroken, recurrent cycle of seven days. He then declares: "With this state of affairs the conclusion can be none other than that the week is a typically Israelite, unique division of time. If we ask concerning its origin and spread we must turn for further information exclusively to the Bible." —page 72.

As for the origin of the week within Israel itself, Meesters points to the fact that the Hebrew word for week is *shabua'*. "The meaning of *shabua'* is clear; for its explanation we need call on no other Semitic language for help. *Shabua'* is derived from the root *shb'*—seven. A sequence of seven days received the name *shabua'* " (page 75). As to the time this first occurred, he confesses ignorance: "Whenever one investigates the places in which *shabua'* occurs, they give little foothold for fixing the antiquity of the week in Israel."—Page 75. As for the reason for the period of seven being chosen—rather than any other number—he points to the universal importance of seven not only in Israel but throughout the ancient East. Many examples of this apart from a time period can be found in the Old Testament (e.g. Gen. 4:15; Judges 16:13, 7; 2 Kings 4:35; Dan. 3:19). In view of this Meesters concludes: "Because seven as a sacred number represented a well-rounded whole, the number seven was also used in Israel for the smallest grouping of a number of days, which received the name *shabua'*. This application of the number seven to a calendrical system is a unique Israelite creation without parallel in any time measurement of the ancient East. Under influence of the holy number seven, Israel grouped seven days into a week."—Page 79.[2]

The Sabbath Not Borrowed

The results of Meesters' investigation of the theories of Sabbath origin are thus almost entirely negative. He will doubtless be accused of having handled—and rejected —too many theories in too short a treatment to give them adequate consideration (this section of his book amounts to 83 pages). He will also be accused of hypercriticism and of rejecting any theory with which a difficulty can be found. The fact is that scholarly conclusions can seldom be based on absolutely unequivocal evidence, and Meesters sometimes gives the impression of demanding just this. At the same time, he has done a distinct service in bringing under one cover a discussion of all these theories and of showing that *when we look for exact or even close parallels to either the Sabbath or the week, outside the Bible and outside ancient Israel we find none.*

While this in itself does not answer the question of origins, it does suggest strongly that the Sabbath was not borrowed by Israel from other nations. At the same time,

in the opinion of this reviewer, the evidences of not entirely dissimilar institutions among the Babylonians, the Canaanites (Ugarit), and perhaps even the Kenites, suggest that the Sabbath, though unique with the Hebrews, existed not in a vacuum but in the context of observances that had some relation to it. Such a context represents a milieu in which motifs inherent in the Sabbath had also found expression in pagan religious society.

Dating of the Decalogue

In the second half of his book, entitled "The Old Testament Texts Concerning the Sabbath," Meesters discusses each reference to the Sabbath in the Old Testament. Perhaps the part of greatest interest to Adventists here is his rather extensive discussion of the origin and dating of the Decalogue (pp. 85-111). It is well known that modern Biblical scholarship generally denies the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and places its composition over a long period extending down to the post-Exilic period. To raise the question of the date of the Decalogue as Meesters does, then, is not simply to ask when Moses received it from God on Mount Sinai, or to try to date the Exodus. It is rather to ask the literary-critical question as to whether passages in which the Decalogue appears—and with it the Sabbath—can be fixed chronologically within the supposed development of the Pentateuchal materials, and whether these strands may indeed be from a very primitive tradition.

Adventists do not generally subscribe to a documentary analysis of the Pentateuch, and it may appear at first sight that Meesters' discussion at this point is of little value. The fact is, however, that in recent years many critical Biblical scholars, using their own methodology, have arrived at opinions regarding the Decalogue that were completely unexpected by their colleagues at the beginning of this century. Meesters traces this movement.

Following the views of Julius Wellhausen,[3] the major Old Testament critic of the late nineteenth century, a large number of scholars during the half century between 1880 and 1930 adopted the opinion that the Decalogue did not originate until after the days of the prophets, long after the Exile. In 1913 Hugo Gressmann was the harbinger of a new era when he temporarily championed the view that the Decalogue could be traced back scientifically to Moses.[4] A decade later H. Schmidt went as far as to connect Moses himself with the origin of the Decalogue.[5] Since

FLORIDIAN, 83, ASKS FOR "SIT-UP" BURIAL TO AWAIT RETURN OF THE LORD

An 83-year-old Tallahassee man has built a three-windowed mausoleum where he plans to sit "embalmed" in a rocking chair, "watching and waiting" for the Lord's return.

"I had already concluded I didn't want to be buried underground," explained B. L. Simmons, a retired employee of the Motor Vehicles Department and a west Florida county legislative representative (1933-1935).

"Not many folks believe the Lord is coming back, but I know He is," Mr. Simmons announced. "That's why I'll be here watching and waiting."

Arrangements have been made with a funeral home for the "burial" and health officials have given him permission to build the concrete block tomb in an old and "forgotten" cemetery, shaded by mossy oaks and overgrown with underbrush.

"Mr. Culley (the funeral director) said he would put me in the mausoleum just like I want to be," the retiree said. "Just sitting in my easy chair with the back to the wall." The chair was a retirement gift from the Motor Vehicles Department.

County Health Director Clifford G. Blitch stated, "We don't care how they are embalmed—sitting up, lying down, or what—so long as they are embalmed by a reputable firm."

The mausoleum, which contains "just enough room inside" for the easy chair, is engraved with the words, "Watching and waiting . . . B. L. Simmons . . . 9-5-1887." A space remains for the date of death.

Mr. Simmons said his wife will not join him in the tomb after her death, because she "has some idea about being sent back to west Florida to be buried beside her father."

Shatterproof windows on the mausoleum? "Well, I never did like the dark," Mr. Simmons explained. A "burial site" in the abandoned old Moody Cemetery south of Tallahassee was cleared by the retiree.

R.N.S.

1930 the view has gained more and more adherents among Old Testament scholars that while the Ten Commandments may not be traced back to the person of Moses, they are from the period of Israel's life in the wilderness. Meesters lists no less than sixteen major scholars who since 1950 with greater or less certainty have championed the Mosaic origin of the Decalogue.[6] All these men work as literary critics and arrive at their conclusions not for apologetic reasons but as a result of their critical studies. While they do not hold to the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, they find evidence to indicate that the Decalogue, at least in rudimentary form, does go back to the time of the sojourn in the wilderness. Among the reasons for their conclusions is the evidence adduced by Mendenhall that both apodictic and casuistic laws appear together in Hittite vassal covenants from the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries just as they do in the Pentateuch (e.g., Ex. 24). Thus apodictic declaration of law is not an exclusively postconquest formulation, as previously thought,[7] but can be traced back to the time of the wilderness wandering.

Scholars who recognize the possibility of dating a primitive form of the Decalogue as early as the wilderness period are divided on whether it can be traced to Moses himself. It can be argued, however, as Meesters and others do[8] that "in the Pentateuch Moses stands forth as the founder of Israel's tradition. Behind the events of the exodus and Sinai there must stand a great, powerful personality: the unique character of Israel's worship demands a unique leader who laid the basis for it. The definitive role which tradition ascribes to Moses must have had concrete points of contact with historical facts, even though many traditions may have been set down in writing later."—Page 106.

In his own thinking Meesters remains cautious as to whether the Decalogue is this early though he obviously inclines toward such a view. He concludes that "if the decalogue in its oldest redaction goes back to the days of Moses, then already in these early days one day was set apart from the seven, whereon all work was supposed to cease."—Page 109. (There is no question of not reckoning the fourth commandment to the primitive Decalogue.)

It is important that we should be aware that for many years the question of Sabbath origins has been a live one among scholars, and that the trends in their conclusions over the past half century are of no small significance. One can wish that Meesters' book had been written in a more widely read language than Dutch—though he gives a short résumé in English at the end—for it provides an excellent survey of current thinking.

[1] E.g. E. Schröder, *Die Keilinschriften und das Alte Testament* (Giessen, 1883), p. 18f(M); H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos* (Göttingen, 1921), p. 155(M); R. Smend, *Lehrbuch der alttestamentliche Religionsgeschichte* (Freiburg i.B., 1899), 160f.(M).

[2] Meesters cites the following scholars who agree that the week is unique in Israel: A. Jeremias, *Das Alte Testament im Lichte des alten Orients* (Leipzig, 1930), p. 40; C. H. Toy, *Introduction to the History of Religions* (Boston, 1913) p. 253(M); S. Mowinckel, *La decalogue* (Paris 1927), pp. 81f.(M); N. H. Tur Sinai, "Sabbat und Woche," *BiOr* VIII (1951), 14(M); E. Kutsch, "Erwagungen zur Geschichte der Passafeier des Massotfestes," *ZThK* LV (1958), 25(M); W. Rordorf, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

[3] J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (6th ed., Berlin, 1905), p. 342(M).

[4] H. Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit* (Göttingen, 1913), p. 462f., 473ff.(M).

[5] H. Schmidt, "Mose und der Dekalog," in *Eucharisterion.* Gunkel Festschrift I (Göttingen, 1923), p. 99(M).

[6] Especially important among these are: O. Proksch, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Gütersloh, 1950), pp. 89f.(M); H. H. Rowley, "Moses and the Decalogue," *op. cit.*, p. 83; W. Eichrodt, *Religionsgeschichte*, pp. 382ff.(M); John Bright, *Early Israel in Recent History Writing* (Studies in Biblical Theology XIX) (London, 1956), p .106; and *A History of Israel* (London, 1960), pp. 115f; H. M. Cazelles, "La Torah ou Pentateuque" in A. Robert and A. Feuillet, *Introduction à la Bible* I (Tournai, 1957), pp. 345ff.(M); Th. C. Vriezen, *De Godsdienst van Israël* (Zeist, Arnhem, 1963), pp. 118f.(M).

[7] "Ancient Oriental & Biblical Law," *BA* 17(1954), 26-46; "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *BA* 17 (1954), 50-76.

[8] Cf. John Bright, *The History of Israel*, p. 116.

Paul VI, Vazken Pledge Christian Unity Efforts

In a joint declaration in Vatican City, Pope Paul VI and Catholicos Vazken I, Supreme Patriarch of All Armenians, expressed thanks to God for having "met one another, prayed together, and exchanged the kiss of peace." On May 9 the two church leaders—in an historic "first"—symbolically healed centuries of division by publicly embracing before the altar in the Vatican Sistine Chapel, and pledging to strive for Christian unity. In the declaration Pope Paul referred to ancient theological disputes that separated Armenian Christians from Roman Catholics, and asked, "Has not the time come to clear up once and for all such misunderstandings inherited from the past?" The central theological dispute revolved around the question Who and what is Jesus Christ? The Church Council of Chalcedon in 480 defined that He is a divine person with two distinct natures, the nature of God and the nature of man. The Armenian Church—which traces its foundations to the early fourth century—rejected the decrees of the council and has been historically classified as "monophysite," that is, as holding that Jesus Christ has only a divine nature, His humanity being completely absorbed by His divinity. R. N. S.